

Arch-Rivals Joined Forces To Create Industry Giant

By Cheryl MacDonald, a local historian and author in Norfolk County.

On July 21, 1841 John Harris was born in Townsend Township in Norfolk County, Ontario. His father, Alanson, was a native of New Brunswick and a Baptist who, like many people of the time, moved from place to place as opportunities presented themselves. John started school in Beamsville Ontario where he also worked in the sawmill his father owned.

In 1857, Alanson had purchased a foundry for the manufacture and repair of farm machinery. By 1872, the company had relocated to a bigger facility in Brantford Ontario. John was one of the mechanics at the Harris factory. He was a bit of an inventor himself, always tinkering to improve the equipment the company manufactured. According to historian Michael Bliss, among the most important of his designs were improvements in self-binding harvesters, including The Little Brantford Beauty, which was one of the best selling pieces of equipment the company manufactured.

He also kept a sharp eye out for other products that might suit the company's line. Among these were the Kirby mower and Kirby reel-rake, which the Harris firm manufactured under license from D. M. Osborne and Company of Auburn, New York.

It was an exciting time to be in this business. During John's lifetime, Canada had gradually become more industrialized. Agricultural societies, which had been established in the late 1700's, were making huge strides in experimenting with new methods of planting, growing and harvesting crops. One of the main features at agricultural fairs was displays of the latest equipment.

A number of men with the inclination, talent and resources saw the manufacture of farm implements as a way to improve agricultural production while making a profit. One of them was Daniel Massey, who started his own factory in Newcastle, Ontario in 1847. Through the 1870's and the 1880's, the two companies were bitter rivals. Both produced light binders that performed equally well. But, like modern car lovers, farmers were either fans of the Massey binder or the Harris binder. (And there were probably long, lengthy debates about the merits of each in blacksmith's shops and general stores at the time.)

During this period John worked hard to build up his business. Unlike his relatively uneducated father, John was much more socially sophisticated and politically active. He held a number of offices, and in his 40's was president of the Reform Association of South Brant. Many thought he was considering a political career.

Fate, unfortunately, intervened. John was already ill with tuberculosis. Then in the spring of 1887, he visited Texas to watch harvester trials and contracted malaria. He died August 25, 1887, barely a month after his 46th birthday. In a tribute to Harris, his Brantford employees commented, "The Great Reaper...stepped in and silenced the active brain and life." John's father was still alive, and John's son Lloyd was involved in the business.

But John had been a driving force behind the success of the company. Four years after his death, Alanson Harris decided to merge with his arch-rival, the Massey Manufacturing Company. It became one of the biggest and most important manufacturers of farm implements in Canada.